

## MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

"Thou hast given me a south (dry) land ; give me also springs of water. And he gave her the upper springs and the nether springs." Josh. xv. 19.

It is both appropriate and intended that this journal should be a medium not only for expressions of current mystical thought, but for records of modern mystical experience ; that it should provide some testimony of positive realisation of Truth rather than be a mere collection of speculations concerning it and of reproductions from the records of mystics of the past. The recent publication in its pages of some such records has brought me, as Editor, such a number of communications by way of appreciation, enquiry, and further instances that I propose to deal with them collectively and to devote a few pages to some reflections upon the subject generally.

Amid the activities of the outer world these great events of the inward life go unheard of. Usually the subjects of such experiences are instinctively and very properly disinclined to speak of them, and in any case the secular press is not the place for them. Where publicity is possible at all, anonymity is certainly desirable. "It is well to conceal the secrets of the King," whether we interpret the word "king" as referable to God or to that element in ourselves which can alone be called royal. Scriptural enjoinders against babbling of Divine intimacies with the soul are numerous. "See thou tell no man"; "Cast not your pearls before swine"; "It is not meet to take children's bread and cast it unto dogs"; "Tell the vision to no man till Christ be risen" in him (so that you may be sure he is upon the same plane of understanding as yourself),

—are counsels based no less upon wisdom than upon grounds which are entirely sound in a scientific way. It will be recalled of certain initial mysteries of the Christ life that, whilst others noised them abroad, “ Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” “ Keeping ” them assists the conserving and consolidation of the extremely subtle energies involved in the inward new birth of which they are the mark ; prating of them—apart from the spiritual vulgarity involved—tends to their enfeeblement and dissipation. If and when it becomes proper to speak of these things the subject of them infallibly knows the due season, and until then will lock up his secrets in the safe repository of his heart with threefold fidelity. “ He who knows God is dumb,” says an Arabic proverb.

The records of such experiences to be found in the classic literature of the inward life are no violation of the enjoinders to secrecy referred to. They will be found to have been set down as purely private memorials, or to have been written at the prompting of their originating source or at the direction of spiritual superiors for the instruction and guidance of a select few. The wide interest accorded them at the present day, alike from the side of scientific psychology and from those anxious to profit spiritually from the study of the inward life as evidenced by its advanced exemplars, inevitably provokes questions having a directly personal bearing. Are these wonderful dilatations of consciousness, these blissful, illuminating intimacies between the individual soul and God, the prerogative only of a special favoured few ? Why are they not more general ? Are there conditions pre-essential to their occurrence ? Is their happening a mark of signal favour, or their absence an obvious mark of disfavour ?—Are such things compatible with life spent perforce in contact with secular pursuits, or occurrences probable to none save those able to yield themselves up to a life of exclusive devotion and austerity ?

It is, of course, easy to answer such queries by saying that what has been realised by some is a possibility common to all, not perhaps in precisely the same manner

or under identical circumstances, but yet in some equivalent way. In Scholastic Theology “ Beatific Vision,” the efflorescence of the mind in God, God at the same time becoming the content of the mind, is a comprehensive formula embracing a wide range of experiences of which it would be as presumptuous to define the lesser forms as it would be impossible even to attempt to describe the fuller ones. The Spirit bloweth where It listeth and how It listeth, and individual minds may both modify and be modified by Its impress. The capacity for spiritual perception being inherent in every human soul, the sole obstacles to its fruition of that which ever encloses it are the lack of will to perceive, and the density or impurities of the intervening media constituting our temporal personalities. No less surely than the vital element in seeds sown in a garden causes them to germinate and push their way through obstructing soil, to withstand wind and rain, and finally to burst forth in an explosion of colour and fragrance before the awaiting sun, may the *vital* centre in man rise from its earthly bed, develop through struggle and storm, and at last blossom into God. As burial in the flower-bed, the pressure and resistance of the enclosing soil, and the apparently adverse, but actually beneficent, action of the elements are essential preliminaries to the bloom, so in the growth of the soul are their equivalents essential to its flowering into the consciousness and presence of its Sun. For which reason such enormous value is to be accorded to life in this prison-house of flesh and the constrictions of physical existence. “ Let the saints rejoice in their beds ! ” is the final testimony (Ps. cxlix. 5) of those so wonderfully arranged and graduated Psalms, so many of the earlier of which lament—as, at first, we are all prone to do—the bondage, weakness, and tyranny of our mortal part ; that is to say, let them be glad of their bodies, of the infirmities and even of the impurities thereof ; for without such bodies and their inevitable incidents of weakness and moral incumbrance there would be no fulcrum of resistance for our higher part to work against, no base or foothold from which the

soul could take an upward leap, no objective field from which the subjective part of us could receive impressions or gather experience. True we lose something, and by an ill-directed life stand to lose even more, by entering into temporary contact with physical life. Wordsworth focussed a great truth in saying that man, in the youth of his flesh,

By the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended

until such time as the imaginativeness and romanticism tincturing the mentality of childhood and youth wear off before contact with the cold stern rigours of mundane existence, and the pristine vision "fades into the light of common day." Yet childhood and youth, although so often and so obviously in near contact with the Real, are after all but half-conscious, or far from self-conscious, of it. It is well, then, that this imperfect half-consciousness should disappear; for were it not so, were it not supplanted by a consciousness relatively false and illusory, were it not subjected to an experience antithetic in every respect to that which is its ultimate and true destiny, how were possible that development and that transmutation which at last shall restore to it—not its original half-consciousness, but a fully equipped self-consciousness capable of differentiating and choosing between Reality and illusion? Hence it is that in so many cases old age, or even middle age, is attended by far fuller and richer spiritual vision than is ever possible to youth. Who has not known cases of old people "moving about in worlds not realised" by their astonished and as yet unawakened friends, and, sometimes when even physically blind, vividly perceptive and naively eloquent about things beyond the reaches of physical sense, yet clear and palpable to them? Others, too, there are for whom, among the flux of the impermanent, the vision of the static Real becomes re-discovered and an abiding possession, so that they can affirm:—

The angels keep their ancient places;  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangéd faces,  
That miss the many-splendour'd Thing!

But slowly, gradually, the unfolding, unveiling process goes on. "Lazarus, come forth!" is a word not of one moment or spoken for a single occasion, but one for ever sounding down the ages; continually liberating the spiritual self from its fleshly tomb and sensuous ceremonials. Our failure to observe the responses to that vibrating word of power is no evidence of its present inoperativeness. Truly, as far as our limited observation goes, darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people; the awakened ones are unheard of and so few and far between. But let not this fact, and the objections of those who use it, deceive us.

Consider the night sky; it has a great message for those who read it in this connection. Sometimes its vast plains, even when unclouded, disclose but little; only a bright spark here and there stakes out, at awful intervals, the "night of the large few stars." At others bright points flash in myriads, and streams of gleaming star-dust strew the dark spaces that enfold us. But beyond the capacity of the unaided eye the simplest magnifying lens reveals undreamed-of further numbers, which a powerful telescope will augment until the mind reels bewildered. But, lastly, to the astronomer's photographic plate, there remains no darkness at all; but one continuous sheen from the massed jewels of the sky proclaims darkness an illusion and reveals that even the physical universe, seen in its totality, is an unbroken continuity of light.

So too with those stars which are the souls of men. Even we can point to outstanding lights here and there, in the persons or the memories of those to whom already has been given "the morning-star." But to the larger vision of an angel's eye, gazing down to earth as we look up to the heavens, how many other stars, think you, must be perceptible than we take account of? How many remote sparkles of light, obscured from general ken, does it see in the developing souls of thousands unknown or of no account to us, but precious beyond speech in the sight of heaven? Great spaces of unrelieved blackness where no flash has yet kindled—yes, such, too, it may perceive; but it foreknows

the as yet dormant potencies of light that needs must blaze therefrom some day; it knows too that even in the obscure and unillumined places every newborn scintillation that comes to redeem that darkness testifies to some human thought or action generated as part of the outworking of the cosmic scheme and coming into harmony with the light and love Divine. Thus to an angel's vision. But to the prescient, all-embracing eye of God, in whom there is no darkness at all, neither any creature that is not manifest in His sight—in whom the end is seen in the beginning, and the consummation is one with the concept and the outworking thereof—the now clouded souls and spirits of entire humanity must appear, not, as to us, separated, individualised, and in varying degrees of development, but in their unity and totality—one unbroken continuity of light.

I have been employing analogy, but now as a matter of personal testimony to things within my knowledge I have reason to believe that mystical experience, even of very high order, is of much greater frequency among us than is supposed. Were it fitting and permissible these pages might be filled with instances that have fallen within my own purview or have been confided to me, bearing every mark of probability and truth; so that I might say like Gregory the Great to his servant, who asked whether it were possible that such things occurred in contemporary life since he himself never heard of them, "I should sooner lack day to talk in than matter to speak of."<sup>1</sup> They are experiences which have occurred to, apparently, the most unlikely persons and often in the most unexpected and improbable circumstances. I exclude occurrences of a merely psychical character, extensions of functional capacity, which may happen under a variety of circumstances and often be totally lacking in spiritual value; and am speaking rather of experiences that are organic, that go to the roots of the soul's being and so influence and quicken it that it becomes "a new creature." Naturally they have been widely varying in character, the principle determining the

<sup>1</sup> *Dialogues of St Gregory the Great*, I. i.

nature of the experience seeming to be the form best suited to the understanding and receptivity of the individual concerned. With marvellous benignity and exquisitely adjusted considerateness is the wind of the Holy Spirit tempered to the shorn lamb It visits. Many of the cases I have in mind have befallen those already informed to some extent in these matters; but at least as many, as well as some of the most impressive, have been the portion of those who know nothing of mysticism as such, who would be sorely puzzled to say what a mystic is, and greatly surprised to learn that they fell within that category.

Reflecting upon these cases generally, there seem to be two types of individuals to whom these experiences come: those naturally, and in excess of most other men, endowed with and displaying the faculty of pure disinterested love for God or their fellow-men; and those called upon, or about to be called upon, to undergo exceptionally severe tribulation. The ability to love, or the lot of suffering—suffering inordinate, inexplicable, and unmerited, as it appears to the natural judgment,—one or other of these seems, speaking broadly, to be the prerequisite for the mystical experience of the nature implied. Perhaps these are but different aspects of the same qualification, for where one of them is conspicuous, the other will generally be found not far away.

Now obviously neither of these qualifications (I use the term only for convenience and not as implying a personal right to a special form of grace) stands within anyone's personal control. "No man hath quickened his own soul." Hypotheses, not without interest, are offered us from various quarters, professing to explain why some persons naturally possess a greater faculty for loving or are predestined to greater affliction than others; but here we will be content with the fact that things are so without seeking to account for it. Yet whilst no one can command these apparent essentials—and from deliberately invoking suffering upon themselves most people may be trusted to shrink—there does indeed exist a method by which anyone who recognises and, with sincere and unaffected anxiety,

deplores their absence in himself, may at least put himself in the way of having one or both of these high graces accorded him. Let him who, however rich his store and precious his experience of natural human affection, honestly realises that, despite it all, he has as yet never known, and is indeed wholly void of, experience of Divine Love in Its direct unmediated action towards him; or let him who, whatever his measure of participation in the common sorrows of life, knows that he has never yet known the way of inward tears or "come to a place which is named Gethsemane"—let him, I say, in this his conscious shame and beggary, meekly, but deliberately and without reserve, place himself upon the altar of utter self-abnegation to the Divine Will to be disposed of as It pleases. "The Father seeketh such to worship Him." It will assuredly be given him according to his desire and in measure adapted to his capacity to bear the gift. He will come to know anguish enough, but with and through it he will come also to the attainment of the previously inexperienced perfect love, for to such love it is not possible for Love to refuse Itself. Of such self-offering it is written that "the Lord loveth a cheerful giver," and that "with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you; and unto you that hear shall more be given" (Mark iv. 24). "You that hear" the deep and mystical sense of these words know that to make such an offering is to seek participation in the perpetual Passion of Christ. For human passivity—alike of action, desire, and will—beneath the moulding hand of the complementary Divine activity—that, and nothing less, constitutes for the immediate practical purposes of the individual soul the Passion of Christ, deliberately to accept which is to enter the Mystic Way.

I will digress here for a moment to comment upon alternatives one continually sees offered to this "strait gate" and "narrow way"; alternatives suggesting to us the possibility that we may "climb up some other way," by adopting methods that shall secure the same result, but that shall elude, or at least reduce and

mitigate, the discomfort and rigours of a path prospectively so painful. At the present day "lo here!" and "lo there!" is being uttered to that end from many sides. "Assert yourself, repolarise yourself, affirm your right to appropriate illimitably all the good in the universe. Proclaim to yourself your inherent royal nature. Take to yourself the wings of the morning and soar beyond the limitations of your cramped existence, the constraints of fortune, the pains of body and of mind. Develop your latent powers; exercise your dormant psychic faculties; enter the silence. There need be no pain, no sickness, no poverty, no unhappiness, no death; they are phantasms of your thought; and in their place there shall be power for you, joy for you, success—generally including dollars—for you!" Under some such form—so alluring because of the half-truth the bait contains—speaks blatantly to-day a voice that once but whispered *Sicut eritis dei*; ye shall be as gods! and floods the press with advertisements of a so-called, but spurious, mysticism.

Now the fallacy—where it is nothing worse—in all this newborn optimism and false mysticism lies in the assumption, express or implied, that man, a fallen creature, dislocated from the true root of his being and transgrafted from (to use biblical metaphor) the Tree of Life to a Tree of Knowledge of good and evil (in other words, from an incorruptible to a corruptible life-basis)—can of himself, and without other assistance than his own natural volition and faculties, elevate himself out of his own condition of imperfection and corruption into one of perfectedness, sanity, and sanctity. Note how differently speaks the voice of Christian philosophy—based as it is upon the recognition (1) of man's fallen, dislocated state, and (2) of the universal presence of a reparative agent constituting an antidote to that state and capable of being appropriated and assimilated by whosoever willeth so to do,—as it expresses itself in its liturgies; confessing at every turn "There is no health in us"; "We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves"; "Because of the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good

thing"; and so on, in many a familiar phrase. And wherever true perception has passed beyond the cortex of any form of religion, Christian or otherwise, there will be found a like acknowledgment of the fact that not our own strength, but a saving grace and power other than ourselves, and of which we can become "children by adoption," must be the redeeming force, the regenerating agent.

Thou canst not even fill the sail of prayer  
Unless from Him breathes that authentic air  
That shall lift up the curtain that divides  
His lover from the harem where *He* hides;  
And the fulfilment of thy vows must be  
Not from thy love of Him—but His for thee! <sup>1</sup>

Now whatever self-improvement, interior development, or other benefit may accrue from the efforts to that end of those who rely upon their own unaided ability to secure their reintegration and spiritual welfare, it is clear that their attitude is one involving a negation—or at least non-acceptance—of the person and office of Him whose words were "No man cometh to the Father save by Me" and "Without Me ye can do nothing." There is no room for Him in their inn; the basic principles of Christian doctrine, the pattern of the Christ-life, and devotion to the Lord's Person, are factors quite negligible to them. It would seem, then, that they are necessarily self-excluded from that especial form of mystical experience—union with Christ in God—which is the haven of every Christian mystic's desire. For what it is worth their mysticism may be good and helpful; I am sure no sincere effort in spiritual matters is vain or without its proportionate reward, and I need pursue the subject no farther. But this reference to it, and to the element lacking in it, leads up to another question, seldom asked, but calling for very serious reflection in these days of critical enquiry as to the personality of Christ.

It is this. Can anyone claim to be a Christian—in the complete sense implied in the words spoken of

<sup>1</sup> Omar Khayyám, *The Birds' Parliament*.

Jews that "he is not one who is so outwardly, but that is one inwardly"—without having undergone such a measure of mystical experience as makes the fact, the existence, and the function of Jesus Christ an irrefutable verity for him? There are high authorities for answering negatively. Did not Peter's reply to the test-question put to him, "Whom say ye that I am?"—a test not put until after a considerable period of intimacy with the Lord's external personality—elicit the statement that flesh and blood had not revealed the true answer, but the heavenly Father? And that statement was subsequently confirmed with great emphasis by St Paul: "I give you to understand that no man *can* say Jesus is the Lord save by the Holy Ghost." Now one has no wish or right to interfere with the judgment or conduct of those who, with all good motives, are pressing after Truth by whatsoever path, for even the devious by-road must at length turn again and at some point strike the King's highway. Nor has one the right or wish to exclude from the Christian category those whose apprehension of its central verities has not surpassed the notional and literal stage; but the two references just cited make it clear that the fulness of the cardinal mystery of Christ is always closely fenced off from the popular mind; that it is reserved for an inner order of understanding by those who have prepared themselves and have been called thereto; and that conviction upon the human personality, the nature and the redeeming office of our Lord, is the result, not of intellectual acceptance alone, not of historical verification or critical research, but of such revealing mystical experience in the soul as makes those facts irrefutable for him who in his own spirit has received them from the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is surely good, if the intention be sincere, to recite the Creed merely with lips of flesh and with the natural mind's understanding;—such methods are fitting preparatives for a subsequent fuller knowledge of the doctrine; but it would seem that something beyond flesh and blood must initiate those who in spirit and in truth can affirm: "Who for us men and for

our salvation came down from heaven ; and was made man ; and was incarnate."

Reverting now from those who, after whatsoever manner, but with deliberate intent and desire, are seeking after some attainment that shall bring them into contact with Reality and the knowledge of things divine, there remain those others—the obscure majority—whose initiation comes otherwise, comes unexpectedly and, as it were, involuntarily in the course of normal workaday life ; those for whom the constraining pressure of Providence, coming usually in the form of adversity and contradiction to their self-will, makes even the common round of daily affairs a way so dolorous as gradually and insensibly to detach them from desire for and reliance upon outward things, to drive them into interior havens of refuge, and to make them mystics unawares. Among this class are to be found very moving examples of experience in the mystic state. Sometimes it comes, after long sojourn in inexplicable gloom or difficulties, as a rewarding gracious light that heals and makes all utterly clear and well ; sometimes as a *viaticum* granted prior to protracted affliction so that, when the valley of the dark shadow must needs be traversed, some quenchless memory may remain and serve therein as a staff of comfort. The late William Sharp (Fiona Macleod) tells how the following triolet was once imprinted upon the wall of his mind, *en bloc*, independently of any conscious effort, and apropos of nothing in his thought, save that it came at a moment of temporary respite after long stress :—

From the silence of Time, Time's silence borrow ;  
In the heart of To-day is the word of To-morrow ;  
The Builders of Joy are the children of Sorrow ;

—a simple instance, but one illustrating the same consolation that is extended in many other forms to the weary and heavy-laden, and showing how, in our emergencies, Jesus still stoops down and writes with His finger upon the "ground"—the "earth" or stuff of our intelligence. I will take leave to reproduce

from the *Hibbert Journal* (April 1911) another touching incident, the narrator of which writes thus :

Some twenty years ago I was appointed student-missionary in a Highland town. It was part of my business to visit in the worst slums in the town. One day I entered a tiny room where, beside a fireplace, an old woman sat smoking a tobacco-pipe. Her surroundings betrayed her extreme poverty ; in one corner of the room there were some live ducks caged in a crate. Entering into conversation with her I found this old woman possessed of a rich spiritual experience, and as I gained her confidence she grew communicative as to some of its forms. Speaking in a mixture of Gaelic and English she told me the following story :—

When I was a young girl I passed through a time of great anxiety about my soul. I was so strained that I passed into the trance state. While in the trance I saw myself lying at the border of a harvest field. Around me the wheat was cut ; in the distance twelve reapers were still at work, and behind them One taller than them all, whose hair fell upon his shoulders like a shower of silver and who was dressed in a white robe that fell to his feet and rolled there like the lapping of a sea-wave. As soon as I saw him I knew he was the Saviour my soul yearned for, and my soul, in the form of a little naked child, fled from me and sped across the stubble with the whirr of a partridge and came to his feet. He turned and looked down, and said, "What, thou here, and thou such a little one, and so cold ! I'll cover thee" ; and with that he took the folds of his robe and flung them around the shivering child. I woke from my trance. I have known a good deal of life's sharp distress since then ; but I have always known this,—that *He covers me with the robe of His righteousness*.

Mystical experience should never be sought after for its own sake, nor, precious as it may be, should it—or at least some forms of it—be overvalued when it occurs. It is not an end in itself ; it does not necessarily imply merit, perfection, or sanctity in the subject of it. It may be the evidence of Divine Love caressing its child ; it may indeed come as gracious healing from the good hand of God,—and yet prove to be a temptation, a test of humility. Detachment, even deliverance from it in its lesser forms, has often been the prayer of those who, wise enough to be dissatisfied with anything but the full term of their desire, have cried "God, of Thy goodness give me Thyself, for if I ask anything less ever me wanteth !" The books of counsel and experience left us by the great adventurers of the inward life con-

stantly warn us against self-illusion, pride, and especially the ability of adverse principalities and powers to make the ardent but imperfectly purged mind the theatre of false fires and specious illumination. Those who are properly prepared, however, have the witness in themselves whereby to distinguish false from true; they know too that whilst the dark powers can display light, to engender inward peace is beyond their power. Also they know whether the vision or revelation is merely psychic and superficial,—the extended perception of the natural faculties,—or pneumatic, central, fundamental. As to this, to quote but one authority among many, Ruysbroeck writes: "When we experience them in the form of images and symbols, they are usually the work of angels, who under God's guidance unroll them before our eyes. If the revelation be purely intellectual and is only seen under forms having no analogies in the created world, but by means of which God reveals Himself in the abyss, we are in the purely spiritual realm. But sometimes the man passes beyond this region, though not yet transcending himself, and is borne into the incomprehensible. Here he can no longer explain how he sees and hears; this is ecstasy, and in this direct contemplation to hear and to see are one."

When, then, the veridic experience comes it brings its own warrants with it and we know that the Divine "Man with the pitcher of water" has been at work. The dryness of our "south land" is alleviated and enriched and we are given "both the upper springs and the nether springs,"—for, when the supernal torrents break upon us, there cannot but flow also the nether springs of our enlarged and purified emotions and the tears of contrition over a barren past. It is in these moments that are fulfilled those testimonies of the Psalmist which so faithfully describe the processes of the inward life, but which remain so closely sealed from the popular mind because they are couched in terms of natural imagery from which they are seldom transposed into their supernatural and only effective significance. "He watereth the hills (the higher part

of us) from His chamber; the earth (of our minds) is satisfied with the fruit of Thy works" (Ps. civ. 13). And again, "Thou didst send a plentiful rain whereby Thou didst confirm Thine inheritance when it was weary. Thy congregation hath dwelt therein; Thou hast prepared of Thy goodness for the (spiritually) poor" (Ps. lxviii. 9-10). And again in Ps. lxv. 9: "Thou visitest the 'earth' and waterest it; Thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God which is full of water; Thou preparest them corn (*i.e.* the substance of immortality) when Thou hast so provided for it."

We know not upon whom of those around us that living water has fallen or, at any moment, may fall. We can discern that it is poured especially upon those who earnestly ask for it, upon those who love much, and upon those who greatly suffer. But we cannot limit the action of the Everlasting Mercy; and there are others of His subjects upon whom that rain descends, at times, in forms, and under circumstances that baffle computation and in presence of which all human judgment is hushed to silence. The promise is "I will pour out My Spirit upon *all* flesh"; and it may be that in the mystical movement of the present day, growing up so surprisingly in the midst of so much devastating materialism, we are observing its gradual, and perhaps accelerated, fulfilment.

As torrents in summer,  
Half-dried in their channels,  
Suddenly rise though the  
Sky is still cloudless;  
(For rain has been falling  
Far off at their fountains);

So hearts that are humble  
Fill full to o'erflowing;  
And they that behold it  
Marvel;—and know not  
That God at their fountains  
Far off has been raining.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Longfellow, *Legend of King Olaf*.